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AUTHOR Holt, Howard B.
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ABSTRACT

There appears to be a need for more significant involvement of the community and the school board in all stages of policy development. Policy is defined as a value-laden term, while administration deals with the determination of how policy should be interpreted in a given situation. Local policy development is affected by several forces that restrict the freedom to act: social forces, including population, economics, and international tension. It is also affected by the force of philosophical commitment to such things as civil rights, the gifted, and the handicapped and restraining forces such as state and federal law, court decisions, and media attention. Three distinct methods of policy development have been established. The first is the classical model, which consists of defining the problem, analyzing it, establishing data, testing alternatives, selecting and implementing the choice, and evaluating the results. Incremental decision-making data, and evaluating the results. Incremental decision-making is the second method, which focuses only on the policies that differ from existing policies, and considers a limited number of alternatives. Mixed scanning is the third method, and is a synthesis of the first two. A brief case study indicates that the demand for greater involvement requires the consideration of conflicting forces in the policy development process. (Author/JK)

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POLICY DEVELOPMENT IN AN URBAN SCHOOL DISTRICT--AN OUTSIDER'S VIEW FROM WITHIN

Howard B. Holt
San Diego State University

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Introduction

It is necessary to begin this discussion by quarreling with my own title. After submitting it, I returned to active administration as a staff member in an urban school district and now believe the term "policy development" is a bit naive. In the first place, a large school district already has policy on every conceivable topic--the proper term should be "policy change." Second, there is an implication that policy is developed by high level thinkers who sit down in a calm and deliberative manner to arrive at rational conclusions. While policy change often starts out this way, the truth is that school boards and administrators are so busy engaging in fire drills that policy tends to emerge as the incidental result of reaction to pressure. Policy is more often a backward look at what has been done, rather than a framework for future action.

Policy Defined

Before proceeding further, it is desirable to come to an understanding as to what the term "policy" means. Herbert Simon has indicated that if our purpose is to distinguish "policy" from "administration" then perhaps it is necessary to distinguish "value" from "fact." In this analysis policy is more nearly a value laden term while administration deals with the determination of how policy should be interpreted in a given situation.[1] This is a useful distinction, and though the application is likely to be less than clear, it will be used in this paper.

It is common in all statements about roles of school boards and superintendents to declare glibly that policy is the province of the board, administration of the staff. Certainly anyone who has an opportunity to work in or even observe a school district is aware that the distinction is

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rarely precise. Simon believes that perhaps a better guideline would be to use the relative importance of an issue as the dividing line. If it is very important, the matter should be decided by the board; if it is less so, then staff can handle it, under appropriate policy.[2] In practice, this principle is more likely to obtain.

Sources of Policy

It is always difficult to explain an American school district to a foreign visitor. Few if any parallels exist to our local entity, governed by an elected group of citizens who need not possess any sort of educational expertise, but who have considerable power to determine both educational policy and practice. As Ziegler and Jennings describe the process:

> Ideally, the board is elected in accordance with constituency preferences; in response to community demands and and needs the board formulates policy; the superintendent, as the legal "clerk," administers the policy. The board then performs an oversight function with respect to this administering. Hence, educational policy is made congruent with constituent needs and demands. Obviously the ideal is not fully realized in school districts nor in other similar governing structures.[3]

As Ziegler and Jennings indicate, the ideal situation does not usually obtain. Furthermore, there is an entire state and national political structure within which local policy must be developed and which restricts the freedom to act. Campbell, et al, have outlined the forces which impinge upon the local district in the following manner:

> Social forces: international tension, population mobility, technological advancement, economics, push for self-determination, change in social structure, etc.
>
> Philosophical commitment: civil rights, concern for the handicapped, concern for the gifted, back-to-basics, etc.
>
> Results: laws, state and federal, media attention, focused local public attention, professional interest, court decisions.
>
> Final step: Need for action by the board.[4]

The analysis above indicates clearly that local policy development does not occur in a vacuum; in fact it can be argued that there is really relatively little "wriggle room" for a school district. The passage in California of the well-known Proposition 13 is a case in point. That tax reduction measure, the darling of conservative thinkers who believe passionately in local autonomy, has resulted in changing the proportion of tax revenue coming from the state from less than 50 percent of the total to more than 80 percent. Under the golden rule--he who has the gold makes the rule--policy will more and more be made at the state level in California. Likewise, as federal laws (special education for example) and court rulings proliferate, further policy restrictions will ensure.

Another local policy determinant is the make up of the school board. A passive board, which either by philosophy, lack of interest, or lack of ability, is willing to rubber stamp administrative recommendations is not likely to have very significant impact. Ziegler and Jennings feel this is characteristic of most boards; however, their study seems to be based largely on data gathered in 1968 and does not appear to be consistent with the kinds of boards now being observed.[5] A pro-active board, on the other hand, will not be at all satisfied merely to respond to recommendations. In the San Diego district where I worked, both newly-elected and veteran board members expressed an interest in a more active role, and were in fact pursuing one.

Still another differentiating factor is the willingness of the community to become involved in policy matters--or in administration. My observation, both in the urban district where I worked and in other districts where I have served as a consultant, is that the world out there has changed--and not always are we professionals willing to accept the change. Both militant groups of single issue citizens (integration,

sex education, or whatever) or nice, supportive PTA types are much more interested than formerly in a pro-active role of their own. Only the internal resistance of bureaucratic structures and the restrictions of law and court decisions have kept them from being even more of a factor.

STRATEGIES FOR POLICY DEVELOPMENT

E. Mark Hanson has outlined three separate ways in which decision making leading to policy development can be carried out. These are:

1. Classical or rational model
2. Incremental or "muddling through"
3. Mixed scanning[6]

The classical model is the way in which it appears that policy should be developed, but probably rarely is. This process includes the usual steps of defining the problem, analyzing it, establishing criteria for judgment, defining alternatives, collecting data, testing alternatives, selecting and implementing the choice, and evaluating results. It all sounds very logical and, in fact, is.

Incremental decision making is, Hanson believes, best described by Charles Lindblom, and can be summarized as follows:

1. The focus is only on those policies that differ incrementally from existing policies, rather than the entire field.
2. A relatively few policy alternatives are considered, and a limited number of consequences explored.
3. The problem is continuously re-defined, allowing for countless ends-means and means-ends adjustments to make the problem more manageable.
4. There is no one "right" decision or solution but a never-ending series of attacks of the issues at hand.
5. It is limited to an alleviation of present, concrete social imperfections rather than to promotion of future social goals.[7]

Lindblom's "muddling through" analysis is fairly close to the reality observed in most real life situations, and was frequently true in the San Diego district.

The final model, mixed scanning, is one propounded by Amitai Etzioni. This model recognizes that rational decision making is somewhat impractical

but also points to the obvious flaws in the incremental method. Mixed scanning then attempts to limit the often unrealistic exploration of all alternatives in the classical model while providing for a broader view through examining a reasonable range of choices. Incremental processes, in Etizioni's view, are inherently conservative since they deal only with alterations in current policy, while mixed scanning provides the opportunity for arriving at sounder conclusions based on more data.[8]

What Causes Change?

Although the model is a familiar one, few better explanations of social change are available than Kurt Lewin's force field analysis. Lewin argues that there are driving and restraining forces in any situation. So long as these remain in a state of relative equilibrium little change is likely to occur. As soon as disequilibrium is present, the stage is set for change.[9] This disequilibrium can occur either from the addition of a new driving or restraining force, or from the removal or dimunition of one of those forces which made up the original equation. In a school district, for example, if the superintendent was a restraining force against a particular change and if that person was replaced by someone who had no particular convictions on the subject, it is quite possible that change would occur. Conversely, if the new superintendent came in with strong beliefs on any issue that was in balance, he or she could be the driving force for change.

Operative forces in Lewin's model can also originate outside the school district, and frequently do. Any governmental or societal element can enter into the change equation as either a driving or restraining force. In the next section, a particular change incident will be examined in an effort to illustrate why policy change does or does not occur.

Policy Change--A Brief Case Study

The San Diego City School District is under a court order to achieve a much higher degree of racial integration. The judge overseeing this process indicated his commitment to a voluntary system, rather than mandatory pupil transfer, and directed the district to submit a plan. One element of this plan was the establishment of a number of "magnet" schools with special programs which were open to students from all over the district. Special provisions were made to ensure racial balance within each of these schools. One of the most successful was a school for the creative and performing arts, housed in a junior high school located in a somewhat racially mixed area. The success of this school created a new problem: applications for enrollment far exceeded the capacity of the site being utilized.

Current policy indicated that magnet schools should be housed as a portion of an existing plant since to take over a site completely would require disruption of the resident student body not involved in the magnet program and require that those students be transported elsewhere. A second relevant current policy was that transporting of students to magnet schools should be as much as possible two-way, rather than achieving integration always by busing students out of minority areas. Finally, policy demanded that racial integration be enhanced by all decisions made.

As the staff investigated the alternatives, it did not appear that there were any useable sites in minority areas of the city and that the current location could not be further expanded, both because it would disrupt a large number of resident students and because facilities were not really adequate. There was, however, a junior high school located in a predominantly white area that could readily be used by transporting resident students a relatively short distance to schools in an exclusive residential area. Surveys of affected parents indicated that such a change would be acceptable.

Parents and staff of the creative and performaing arts school also were highly favorable to this move.

When the proposal was presented, there was an explosion from the minority community, or at least from several vocal representatives. Also, two newly-elected board members, one of them the only minority group member, began to question the recommendation of the staff on the basis of its impact on integration. Further investigation was then made of sites in minority areas, but surveys indicated that parents of children in those schools would object to having their youngsters transported out of the community. After much discussion and many changes of direction, the entire matter was shelved for a year and the school of creative and performing arts left at the original site with no major expansion of enrollment. Further study is to be made.

While the above account is brief, it does provide a basis for a force field analysis using the Lewin model. The heart of the controversy could be said to be a conflict among existing policies--no available alternative simultaneously preserved magnets as schools within schools, transported students both into and out of minority areas, and enhanced integration. All proposed plans did move resident students out of their schools involuntarily but in the one proposal, parents had indicated approval. Those forces favoring the move of the school of creative and performing arts to the white junior high school could be listed as follows:

Central office staff
Staff of the school
Parents of students in the school
Parents of students who wished to enroll in the school
Newspapers
Some board members

The forces arrayed against this move, and in favor of finding another solution were:

Two new board members
Representatives of minority community
Judge who issued integration order (presumably--he did not publicly comment)
Plantiffs in court suit leading to integration order
Integration task force

The district made an error in the original assessment of the strength of the forces on each side--believing that they could carry out the move as planned. It now appears likely that some other solution will be sought which will be satisfactory to those forces now in ascendancy. While the judge who issued the order did not publicly comment, he possesses the greatest amount of power in an otherwise balanced situation. Policy must now be changed, where needed, to make certain that racial integration receives top priority in any decision area. The power of the two new board members is also now a factor to be reckoned with.

The case described illustrates the policy change process as it often operated in at least one urban school district. Much of the action described was accompanied by packed board meetings, newspaper publicity, inflamed rhetoric, and time pressures created by the need to set schedules and assign students and staff for the coming school year. Although much careful planning under the classical model preceded the original recommendations, once the issue became public, there was little opportunity for calm deliberation. Much policy change, especially of the really significant nature, occurred in this way.

How does an urban district, or any other district, escape this kind of pressure cooker in policy development? There are no magic answers but at least one direction could be taken. In the case described, and in several other important issues, there was evidence that powerful elements in the community were consulted much too late in the process. They were asked to react to plans that were already well formulated, rather than being in on the initial stages. Likewise board members, especially the new ones, wanted a

greater degree of involvement. This kind of broad participation appears to be what is being demanded by many groups; the commitment to full consultation on the part of school administrators must be perceived as genuine, not mere window dressing. This level of involvement is especially difficult for a large district; it takes so long to inform and consult affected members of the staff that there is little time, or interest, left for others. I observed a similar demand for participation on the part of a suburban community where I was assisting with the hiring of a new superintendent. The community demanded, and got, a vital role in the process; upon being given that role, much tension was relieved.

Summary

What has been said in this paper may be summarized as follows:

1. The line between policy and administration is not a clear one--perhaps relative importance of an issue is a better basis for assigning roles to school boards and professional staffs.

2. Policy development in school districts is frequently incremental or at best mixed scan rather than of the classical model.

3. Elements other than the school district staff are becoming increasingly important in policy development.

4. Force field analysis is a help in understanding how policy develops, or fails to develop.

5. It is not always possible to determine correctly in advance the power of each element in a force field.

6. There appears to be a need for staff to seek a more significant involvement of the community and the school board in all stages of policy development.

Notes

[1]Herbert A. Simon, Administrative Behavior. New York: The Free Press, 1976, pp. 52-59.

[2]Ibid., p. 57.

[3]L. Harmon Ziegler and M. Kent Jennings, Governing American Schools. North Scituate: Duxbury Press, 1974, pp. 242-3.

[4]Roald F. Campbell, et al., Introduction to Educational Administration. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1971, pp. 308-12.

[5]Ziegler, op. cit., p. 244.

[6]E. Mark Hanson, Educational Administration and Organizational Behavior. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1979, pp. 88-95.

[7]Ibid., pp. 92-93.

[8]Ibid., pp. 93-94.

[9]Kurt Lewin, "Frontiers in Group Dynamics: Concept, Method and Reality in Social Science; Social Equilibria and Social Change," Human Relations, I, No. 1 (June, 1947) pp. 5-41.

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